



July 20, 2002

Cars Can Get Much Cleaner

By FRED KRUPP

On Monday, Governor Gray Davis of California is expected to sign into law legislation to reduce greenhouse gas pollution, the prime contributor to global warming, from automobiles sold in California. Cars account for 40 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions in that state. Under the federal Clean Air Act, the other 49 states have the option of following suit, and California's example may well spur them to do so. The question now is: What will the car companies do?

To prevent passage of the law, automakers mounted a full-scale, multimillion-dollar advertising and lobbying campaign against the law. Their ads predicted economic catastrophe for California companies and consumers. The scare tactics did not dissuade state lawmakers. The law sensibly provides for standards that are cost effective, prohibits bans on any class of vehicle, and gives the carmakers until 2009 to comply. Yet the headline of one print ad was, "I'm scared to death and you should be too." The same ad proclaimed, "Supporters of this legislation just don't want you driving S.U.V.'s, pick-ups and minivans. If they really had their way, they wouldn't let you drive at all." California culture is built on driving, but Californians also know that reducing greenhouse gases is technically feasible — just as it was feasible to build safer, cleaner cars than the ones we drove in the 1960's.

The automakers fought against mandatory seat belts in the 1960's. In opposing the original Clean Air Act of 1970, the American Automobile Manufacturers Association said that it would be impossible to achieve the new targets and that "manufacturers . . . would be forced to shut down." Another industry executive testified before a Senate committee in 1974 that by 1979 new fuel economy standards would "restrict the industry to producing subcompact-size cars — or even smaller ones." In the debate over the 1990 Clean Air Act, auto industry executives claimed that further reducing auto emissions would be financially ruinous. Congress moved ahead and enacted new laws requiring a 39 percent reduction in hydrocarbons and a 60 percent reduction in nitrogen oxides in auto emissions. The result? Automakers enjoyed a decade of record profits.

It's no surprise that the auto companies are poised to go down the same obstructionist road on California's greenhouse gases law. The industry is likely to try to put a citizens' referendum on the ballot that would override the new law. No doubt they will spend tens of millions of dollars trying to swamp the public with the same false warnings.

What if, instead, the auto industry were to take the resources it will devote to waging political warfare on the new legislation and use that money and the talents of its engineers to accelerate the development of technology to limit greenhouse gas emissions from cars and trucks? Much of the technology already exists today to accomplish this goal. As in the past, automotive engineers are likely to prove far more ingenious in producing new technological answers than their bosses give them credit for. There is simply no reason to believe that tighter emission controls can't be readily reached in seven years.

In fact, four years ago, BP, the multinational energy corporation, committed to reducing their worldwide emissions of greenhouse gas pollution by 10 percent below 1990 levels by the year 2010. This spring, eight years ahead of schedule, BP announced that it had already achieved that level of reduction at no net costs while experiencing steady growth in its business.

Earlier this week, the attorneys general of 11 states wrote to President Bush urging strong federal action to cut greenhouse gas pollution. While the states wait for federal leadership, automakers need to be compelled to achieve what they can in fact achieve without onerous costs. By leading the way, California's new law will help set auto industry standards for the rest of the nation. This will not only benefit the environment, but it will keep American automakers competitive with our European and Asian rivals in making the clean cars that consumers and nations demand.

Fred Krupp is the executive director of Environmental Defense.

[Copyright 2002 The New York Times Company](#) | [Permissions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)